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Commentary/Commentaire

Gerard Postiglione
University of Hong Kong

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Gerard A. Postiglione, University of Hong Kong

As China was reforming and developing its economy over the past 30 plus years, it also managed to popularize nine-years of basic education, and it plans to have most students attend senior secondary school by the decade's end. Yet, it cannot hope to sustain its rising prosperity without excellent teachers. A civilization with Confucius as a cultural icon provides a head-start in underlining the importance of teachers in China's global reemergence. However, in itself that will not be enough. Although it has a proud heritage that honors teachers, the world in the 21st Century requires much more from teachers, even in the most developed economies. At a minimum it means providing teachers with more training, adequate salaries and working conditions.

As I write this postscript, I am reminded of the hundreds of teachers I met as I visited schools in China over the past 30 years. I was as impressed by the struggles of rural teachers who do so much with so little as I was by the efforts of urban teachers who struggle to stay on the cutting edge of educational reform. I was moved by the many poor rural teachers who used their own money, even though they did not always get paid on time and lived in shabby shacks, to buy books and supplied for students who could not afford them. I was also struck by how all schools, rich and poor, adhere to the policy of teaching English to all beginning in grade 3 of primary schools. As this volume will show, the demands on China's teaching profession remain formidable as the country aims to become a fully competitive knowledge economy by mid-century.

Despite the difficult conditions that many teachers face, China will still have to attract the best and brightest into the teaching profession. It will have to provide what they need to remain committed and effective. That means having to stabilize the working conditions of teachers amid new market forces and economic globalization. This collection of articles provides an important piece of the answer. Each article is based on freshly collected data from case studies in different parts of the country. The data are presented and analyzed in a clear and straightforward manner. The articles examine the wide array of cases – migrant teachers, teachers of English, and those who teach in urban, rural, ethnic minority areas, as well as special economic zones, in either public or private schools. While there have been numerous studies of teachers in China, the authors of these articles aim squarely at the effect of the market economy and economic

globalization on China's teachers, including how linguistic instrumentalism plays out for teachers.

By the end of the decade, the access rate to postsecondary education will reach 40 percent, and several universities will be among the best in the world. In short, China is perched to become a major nation in educational provision. Yet, whether that means quality education for all or only some will depend upon the quality of the teaching profession.

It is timely for this collection to begin with the subject of migrant teachers. Before long, China will become an urban society and students from rural migrant families will unfortunately continue to lag behind those of urban households. With urbanization, migrant teachers will become more common. It is correct to remember that even Confucius was also migrant teacher, who after leaving his home in the state of Lu, wandered for about twelve years, from one state to another teaching about how to put ideas into practice. Contemporary migrant teachers share that aspiration, though unlike Confucius, many have become commodities, as Shibao Guo notes, "who are sold to the school and dispatched at the discretion of school owners and management."

The other new breed of teacher to be commissioned in the service of globalization is the English teacher. For Yan Guo, this is just another sign that "teaching has been devalued and commodified in the age of the market economy" to promote national economic competitiveness. This is because those who cannot speak English begin to be thought of as second-class citizens. The pressure to provide teachers of English is compounded in a major ethnic autonomous region where teachers of the main ethnic minority group have to use English, Chinese and Arabic script (for the Uyghur language). The near impossible struggle there, as Beckett notes, is mainstream acceptance that to achieve proficiency in Chinese requires a "threshold literacy in their first language to be successful students and future citizens ready to take their places in modern society." The gap between rural and urban teachers, even in a major province such as Hunan, remains a major stumbling. Qing Li points to the large disparity between the rural and urban area, as reflected in teachers' working and living conditions. In the capital city of Beijing, as Linyuan Guo shows, many teachers feel caught between the old and new curriculum, facing creative students but having to curtain their imaginations in deference to the pressure of national university entrance examination. While such demands can sap the energy and dent the morale of the teaching profession, Lorin Yochim makes the valuable observation that under the daily stress and multiple demands, China's teachers resist becoming "mindless minions" or duped to become passive and powerless.

Rather they strategically calibrate their resistance in terms of the cultural and material limitations they face. Yet, this is hardly a solution.

China's future prosperity depends on the well-being, living conditions, and societal status of teachers. If the well-paid and housed teachers in Shanghai schools can manage to help their students score atop those in other countries in science and mathematics, according to the last PISA results, then one has to ask how to provide the conditions for teachers across the country to do the same – not merely for the sake of international rankings, but for making China earn the title of an education nation. As this collection of empirically based research articles argues, the teaching profession needs more than the promulgation of a Teacher Law. There is a dire need for measures to reduce social injustice and inequity, as well as a need to raise awareness about the increasingly important role that teachers play in a knowledge economy and information based society.

Gerard A. Postiglione is Professor, Faculty of Education, University of Hong Kong. He is editor of the journal, *Chinese Education and Society*, and the book series: *Critical Studies on Education and Society in China*. Among his books are: *Education and Social Change in China: Inequality in a Market Society*, and *China's National Minority Education: Culture, Schooling and Development.* He is the international advisor of the *International Journal of Chinese Education*, and *China Educational Development Yearbook*.